



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

Role of Retention in  
Quality of Learning:  
Prospects and  
Perspectives for  
Improving Education  
Levels

# Role of Retention in Quality of Learning: Prospects and Perspectives for Improving Education Levels



COMMONWEALTH *of* LEARNING

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## Contents

List of Tables.....	6
1. Introduction .....	7
1. Purpose and Objects .....	9
2. Literature Review .....	10
3. Hypotheses and Research Questions .....	11
Hypotheses .....	11
Research Questions .....	11
4. Processes and Methods.....	12
Methods.....	12
Description of the Respondents .....	13
Description of Sampling .....	14
Description of the Research Instruments .....	14
Limitations .....	15
Measures of Reliability and Validity .....	16
Description of Analysis .....	17
5. Findings and Discussion .....	18
Student Retention.....	18
Factors influencing school dropouts .....	20
Measures by school and community to address school dropout issues.....	25

Enablers for students to remain in school and continuing education .....	28
Challenges to Students Remaining in School and Continuing Their Education .....	30
Social attitudes towards girls' education .....	30
Inclusive education .....	31
Poverty and "economic backwardness" .....	32
Infrastructure .....	32
Services .....	33
Student Retention and Quality of Learning Outcomes .....	34
Policy Responses to Promote Students' Retention and Inclusion .....	38
Accessibility of secondary education .....	38
Transportation .....	38
Inclusive education .....	39
Placement of adequate number of teachers .....	39
Legislation to make it compulsory for parents to send their children to school .....	39
Economic improvement of families .....	40
6. Lessons Learned and Pointers for Future Action .....	41
Value of Students' Retention Research .....	41
Collaborative Approach to Student Retention .....	41
Managing Research Ex Situ .....	43
Reliability, Accessibility and Public Accountability .....	43

Unique Prompts to Encourage Student Retention .....	44
Annexure 1: Data .....	45
Summary of Qualitative Data from Focus Group Discussions with Communities .....	45
Summary of Qualitative Data from Focus Group Discussions with Girl Students of Grades9/10.....	47
Summary of Qualitative Data from Key Informant Interviews with District Education Staff .....	55
Annexure 2: Data Collection Tools.....	56
7. References .....	64

### **List of Tables**

Table 1: Respondents by method of data collection.....	13
Table 2: Sampling of schools for the study .....	14
Table 3. Trends in retention in Grade 10.....	18
Table 4. Factors influencing dropping out from school.....	21
Table 5. Students' retention and academic performance of two cohorts .....	35

## **1.0 Introduction**

Retention<sup>1</sup> and academic success are issues of concern in education across the world. They are particularly concerning in the context of ensuring student diversity and extending the participation of disadvantaged groups (Crosling et al., 2009). The Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2023) shows that progress has been made in completion rates worldwide, with 87 per cent and 59 per cent of children completing primary and secondary school, respectively. The Educational Attainment Gender Gap is currently 5 per cent in favour of boys and is expected to close in the next 16 years (World Economic Forum, 2023). However, wide gender gaps persist, and Asian and Sub-Saharan African countries such as Pakistan, Kenya, Mozambique, Malawi and Uganda rank among the countries with the widest gaps (World Economic Forum, 2023).

In 2022, the out-of-school population increased to 250 million, largely due to the exclusion of girls, despite the tertiary education gross enrolment ratio reaching 41 per cent (UNESCO, 2023). When students withdraw from their studies before completing them, they hamper their ability to achieve their goals. Premature withdrawal from education is also costly for the education system overall, for families and for societies (Aljohani, 2016). The World Economic Forum (2019) reports that annual spending per student from primary to tertiary education averaged around US\$10,500 across the OECD countries. This includes the cost of training and payment of teachers, and costs associated with infrastructure, student resources and administration. While this figure is not representative of all countries, it illustrates the extent of the waste associated with a student dropping out before completing the school cycle, including tertiary education. The Centre for Global Development (Rossiter & Konate, 2023) estimated the lifetime earnings losses arising from dropout for 43 low- and middle-income countries to be 0.1 to 5.4 per cent of GDP.

The Global Gender Gap Report (2023) shows that Southern Asia has closed 96 per cent of the gender gap on the Educational Attainment sub-index, but some countries — for

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<sup>1</sup> Percentage of students initially enrolled at the beginning of a course of education who eventually complete the course.

example, Pakistan — have achieved only 82 per cent. The report ranks Pakistan 142nd out of 146 countries for this indicator. With support from the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), under the GIRLS Inspire initiative, two partner organisations were supported from 2016 to implement interventions to increase retention in secondary school, help girls who had dropped out of school return to school and support students who had previously dropped out to stay in school. To assess the impact of these interventions, COL conducted a study on the role of retention in the quality of learning. This is the analytical report on that study. The findings have strategic value in driving how COL works with partners to design programmes that target and respond to barriers to educational attainment.



## **2.0 Purpose and Objects**

The study had three main purposes:

1. Identify the patterns of retention among students from marginalised communities, with a specific focus on girls and children with disabilities, and examine how the current retention strategies are responsible for those patterns.
2. Determine the relationship between students' retention in education and the quality of their academic performance (learning outcomes), with a specific focus on girls and children with disabilities from marginalised communities.
3. Use the results to suggest improvements in the strategy and programme design of the GIRLS Inspire initiative.

### **3.0 Literature Review**

Globally, there is consensus that students do not leave education for only one reason. Studies show that a combination of inter-related factors influence the decision to remain in or leave education. Sabates et al. (2010) note that “there are often precursors to dropping out, where children could be seen to be at risk or vulnerable to early withdrawal” (p. 13) — for example, grade repetition, low achievement and over-age enrolment. These precursors are impacted by individual-level determinants of dropout, including intrinsic motivation to continue and household situations such as child labour and poverty. Academic performance and student engagement are consistently identified as primary influencers. If students are engaging, learning and seeing themselves progress, they are less likely to leave education (Crosling et al., 2009).

At the school level, access to school and the quality of educational provision are fundamental for improving student retention and educational attainment. While agreeing that poverty and the quality of education are critical to retention, Sarker et al. (2019) identified several factors that also affect retention and dropout, including parents’ willingness to keep their child in school, biased social practices and inequality of access.

One way to improve students’ retention in school is to identify the influences on and causes of dropout and to then use that knowledge to look for creative solutions and take action to address them (Yadav et al., 2012). In the context of equality and diversity legislation, institutions are required to proactively make changes that promote the success of all students — for example, improving understanding of the diversity of students, including where they come from and what their interests and aspirations are. This improved understanding can then help inform the organisation of programmes and curricular content, including tailor-made support for disadvantaged groups.

## **4.0 Hypotheses and Research Questions**

### ***Hypotheses***

1. There is a relationship between increased retention of students from marginalised communities, especially girls and children with disabilities, and increased, or improved, quality of their learning outcomes or academic performance.
2. Increased participation of community and education institutions in addressing students' retention issues increases the proportion of students from marginalised communities, especially girls and children with disabilities, who remain in education and complete their secondary school qualifications.

### ***Research Questions***

1. When and why do students from marginalised communities, especially girls and children with disabilities, leave education?
2. What are educational institutions already doing to address these issues and how effective are those strategies?
3. What are the target communities already doing to address these issues and how effective are those strategies?
4. What factors increase students' retention? Is there a relationship between communities' and education institutions' participation in addressing dropout issues and the level of students' retention?
5. Does student retention in education influence the chances that students will have quality learning outcomes? If so, how?

## 5.0 Methodology

This study was primarily a quantitative research study, with both descriptive and correlational designs to describe the status of student retention in secondary education and provide systematic information about patterns in and relationships between students' retention rates and their quality of learning. A questionnaire was administered to collect data on retention and continuation rates from sampled secondary schools. This quantitative approach was complemented by a qualitative approach to identify key categories and inter-relationships between student retention and local strategies in schools and communities. The qualitative approach involved focus group discussions with students and communities and key informant interviews (KIIs) with head teachers of the participating schools and a senior official in the public education system. By using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches we hoped to gain a more complete picture of retention and strengthen the credibility of this research study's conclusions.

The research included looking at:

- a. increased student retention in secondary education
- b. enhanced quality of learning outcomes among students who remain in and complete secondary education as dependent variables

The independent variables were:

- a. community participation's influence on enhancing students' retention in education
- b. the role of educational institutions in addressing the issues that lead to students dropping out of education

This research inquiry consistently followed a set of guiding principles to corroborate the veracity of statements, ascertain the facts and protect the security and dignity of respondents. The field work for the pilot study was done between October and November 2022 and for the main study, between January and April 2023.

### 5.1 Description of the Respondents

The questionnaire was distributed to head teachers in sampled schools for information about two cohorts of students: students in the final grade who enrolled at grade 6 in 2016–17 and students in the penultimate grade who first enrolled in secondary education in 2017–18. Their continuation in school was traced until the 2021–22 academic year. A six-year period was considered to represent retention in secondary education. The student group for focused discussion comprised grades 9–10 male and female students from the participating secondary schools, which were all single-sex schools. The communities’ group for focused discussion comprised equal numbers of men and women from sampled villages in the catchment area of the secondary schools. The key informants for interview were head teachers/principals from sampled schools and one senior official from the public education system.

Table 1: Respondents by method of data collection

Method	Respondents	Women	Men	Girls	Boys	Total
Questionnaire	Schools			4	4	8
Focus group discussions	Students			48	32	80
Focus group discussions	Communities	33	19	9	0	61
Key informant interviews	School Staff	6	5			11
<b>Total</b>		39	24	61	36	160

## 5.2 Description of Sampling

The study involved 20 villages where Bedari worked in partnership with COL. Those villages have 18 public secondary (up to grade 10) and higher secondary (up to grade 12) schools between them. Sampling involved probability sampling in two stages. In the first stage, we drew a 30 per cent sample of secondary and higher secondary schools by a simple random method. Private schools in the area were not included. Eight schools, located in four of the villages and all single-sex, agreed to participate in the study. Students in the final and penultimate grades in the schools were included in the focus group.

Table 2: Sampling of schools for the study

Schools	Total number of schools		Sample		
	Secondary	Higher secondary	Secondary	Higher secondary	Total
Girls	5	3	3	1	4
Boys	7	3	2	2	4

In the second stage, which was the community level stage, 30 per cent of locations in the catchment area of the sampled schools formed the sample. Locations where the schools were situated were excluded to avoid skewed responses about girls' retention.

## 5.3 Description of the Research Instruments

The questionnaire comprised two sets of questions. First, on enrolment at Grade 6 in the academic years 2016–17 and 2017–18 and retention or continuation of only those enrolled at higher grades until the final school grade in the academic year 2021–22. Any new admissions in subsequent years were not considered for tracing the retention. Second, on trends noticed between these two cohorts and reasons for those trends.

The focus group discussions with students revolved around two topics: enabling factors for and challenges to continuing education and reasons for dropout. These discussions also involved seeking students' views on the role of schools in terms of addressing the issues

that influence students to leave school and the role of the community in terms of ensuring that students can enrol in secondary school and not leave before they have completed their education.

The focus group discussions with communities revolved around local dropout rates in the last two years and what actions communities have taken to address the issues that influence dropout rates. It also sought community members' responses to questions or comments about the community's role in preventing dropout as perceived by students.

The key informant interviews with head teachers revolved around the dropout rate in their schools in the last two years and the efficacy of their interventions in addressing issues that influence students to leave school. These interviews had a specific focus on issues relating to the retention of girls and children with disabilities. They also sought to elicit head teachers' responses to how students perceived the role of schools in ensuring retention or continuation. Moreover, the interviews included questions about trends in retention and how retention affects the quality of learning outcomes.

The key informant interview with a senior official from the public education department focused on a discussion about the effectiveness of policies and strategies in terms of retention rates among students in general and retention rates among girls and inclusion and retention of children with disabilities specifically.

#### **5.4 Limitations**

The limitations of the study are rooted in the quantitative data.

- a. The schools' administration did not share all the data we requested. They filled in the questionnaire with information about the number of students on their rolls (records) in each year and grade and not how many of them continued after their enrolment at Grade 6. The study aimed to understand student retention rates at the end of each academic year, using the year of enrolment as a reference point. However, given the difficulty of collecting such data for all grades, we resorted to identifying retention rates among students in Grades 8, 10 and 11. We discovered

discrepancies between the figures we obtained for retention rates at these grades and figures given in earlier reporting. Teachers appeared to be sensitive about the figures, as they are rewarded for enrolment but called in to explain dropout. Furthermore, the non-salary budget was linked to enrolment figures. It was difficult to pursue this matter further.

- b. All students who turned up to take the public examinations held in the academic years 2020–21 and 2021–22 received a passing grade in response to disruptions in their education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, we could not examine the relationship between students' retention in education and their performance in public examinations.
- c. Data specific to marginalised communities and children with disabilities were not available. Some schools had no children with disabilities enrolled while others had children with only certain disabilities enrolled, but no details were recorded.

### **5.5 Measures of Reliability and Validity**

The data collection tools (questionnaire, key informant interview and focus group discussion) were piloted in three schools (two secondary and one higher secondary). Their content,<sup>2</sup> construct,<sup>3</sup> predictive<sup>4</sup> and concurrent<sup>5</sup> dimensions were subsequently reviewed based on feedback from the pilot testing. This ensured the validity of the instruments in measuring the patterns of students' retention in education and the role of retention in quality of learning.

Two key processes were conducted to ensure reliability in measurement of the data collection tools. First, an experienced researcher was chosen for the field work. Second, this researcher and her team received orientation on the study design and the data

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<sup>2</sup> Appropriate content: Items are fair and representative of the entire assessment purpose and their quality.

<sup>3</sup> Measures the underlying theoretical construct that it is supposed to measure.

<sup>4</sup> Measures forecasts about an individual's future performance. Such a measure must be technically adequate and of practical use.

<sup>5</sup> Accuracy of criteria for predicting a specific/concrete outcome.



collection instruments, and reorientation after the pilot study, all of which contributed to their consistency in administering the instruments. This step reduced the experimenter effect and enhanced inter-rater reliability.

The purpose and objectives of the research were shared with all the respondents. The respondents gave their consent (verbal/written) to participate in the survey and agreed not to share stories they heard from other members during the discussions. They also consented to the discussions being recorded. The researchers assured them that their responses would be anonymous, that names of respondents or schools would not be disclosed and that they could choose not to respond to any question at any point during data collection if they were not comfortable doing so.

### **5.6 Description of Analysis**

The quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics using distribution (simple frequencies) and central tendency (average scores) of the data to measure variables and describe correlations between student retention rates and community/education institution participation in ensuring continuation of students in school. The qualitative analysis was inductive to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue of retention. It included:

- a. transcribing the data from the focus group discussions and key informant interview into a manageable form,
- b. organising and categorising the data,
- c. identifying key themes and patterns, and
- d. interpreting the inter-relationships between the variables determined by the research questions that emerged from the data.

The analysis used an epistemological social constructivism approach with an emphasis on how group members constructed shared meaning about concerns about students' retention.

## 6.0 Findings and Discussion

The study findings can be separated into two main categories: student retention and academic performance. Within these categories, we looked at the reasons for dropout and measures taken to address those reasons, using the research questions as our key reference.

### 6.1 Student Retention

Student retention in secondary education at Grade 10 in two cohorts of enrolment (2016–17 and 2017–18) in the eight sampled schools was over 80 per cent for the first cohort and over 85 per cent for the second. This positive movement between the two cohorts is significant in four sampled schools (two girls’ schools registered an increase of 5–9% and two boys’ schools, 18–22%). Furthermore, although overall the gender difference is marginal, two sampled girls’ schools recorded a difference of over 10 per cent lower retention compared to boys’ schools and two sampled boys’ schools recorded over 15 per cent lower retention compared to girls’ schools in the first cohort. However, it is inspiring to notice a positive movement in the next cohort. Two sampled schools located in one village recorded an equal and high rate of retention for girls and boys. In other villages, there was a marginal decrease in gender difference. The retention rates among children with disabilities could not be examined as there are no active policies and practices for their enrolment and retention in regular schools.

Table 3. Trends in retention in Grade 10

School	Sex	Cohort 1: 2016–17		Cohort 2: 2017–18	
		Enrolled at Grade 6	Retained Grade 10	Enrolled at Grade 6	Retained Grade 10
V1S1S2	Girls	40	32e (82%)	38	32e (84%)
	Boys	90	85 (94%)	87	83 (95%)

<b>V2S1S2</b>	<b>Girls</b>	21	18 (86%)	20	19 (95%)
	<b>Boys</b>	13	8 (61%)	24	19 (79%)
<b>V3S1S2</b>	<b>Girls</b>	33	26 (79%)	31	24 (77%)
	<b>Boys</b>	42	37 (88%)	43	36 (84%)
<b>V4S1S2</b>	<b>Girls</b>	56	48 (86%)	57	52 (91%)
	<b>Boys</b>	108	75 (69%)	103	94 (91%)
<b>All eight schools</b>	Girls	150	124 (83%)	146	127 (87%)
	Boys	253	205 (81%)	257	232 (90%)

*e= estimated, using the trend since retention data could not be collected.*

The rate of students' retention at Grade 10 is encouraging, and that of girls is especially inspiring. At 82 per cent for the first cohort and 88 per cent for the second cohort across all eight schools, it is higher than the district's completion rate for junior secondary (58%). Chakwal district registers the highest completion rate for junior secondary (i.e., until Grade 10) (58%) and senior secondary (i.e., until Grade 12) (38%) in the Punjab province (UNICEF, 2022). The district is one of the top six ranked on enrolment and retention for 2018–19 (Academia Magazine, 2019), 2019–20 and 2020–21 (Sheik, 2016). The high retention rate of girls in secondary education reflects the government's committed and consistent efforts to encourage and monitor female enrolment and retention. It also reflects parents' positive attitudes towards securing their daughters' future with academic qualifications. The work of Bedari, a non-governmental, voluntary organisation advocating for girls' education, in this area could also have contributed to this positive change in girls'

education.<sup>6</sup> This is a departure from the existing research which notes that female students are increasingly more likely to drop out of school at an earlier stage of their education than male students (Mughal et al., 2019). Another study found that the dropout rate across all levels of schooling is highest at secondary school level (Grades 9 and 10) and in rural areas for both girls and boys (ASER, 2018).

The quantitative information from schools was triangulated with information from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The communities reported that girls drop out from school at Grade 8 or 9 while more boys complete Grade 10 and then leave education. Female students in Grade 9/10 recalled that between two and eight friends, enrolled in the same year as them at Grade 6, left school after Grade 8. The male students in Grade 9/10 recalled that between two and four friends, enrolled in the same year as them at Grade 6, dropped out at Grades 9 or 10. These figures reflect the retention rate trend observed from the data but contradict community responses to questions about the number of school dropouts. The teachers presented yet another trend. The teachers from boys' schools reported zero dropouts since all boys complete matriculation and only 1–2 per cent might drop out at higher secondary (Grades 11/12). There was a divided response from the head teachers of four girls' schools. Two claimed that only 1 per cent of students drop out, and two estimated that 50 per cent of girls were retained at Grades 9/10 and 40 per cent at Grades 11/12. These two schools also reported that a greater number of girls than boys drop out at Grade 9/10, based on the available information. The District Education official confirmed that girls' enrolment and retention are good in 70 per cent of the schools in the district. Grades 8, 9 and 10 in secondary education seem to be the levels at which most dropouts occur.

## **6.2        *Factors influencing school dropouts***

The focus group discussions identified diverse factors that cause students to drop out of education (see Table 4).

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<sup>6</sup> An unpublished impact study by Bedari recorded girls' secondary education completion rate as 60 per cent in 2022.

Table 4. Factors influencing dropping out from school

Influencing factors	Respondents			
	Students		Community	Schools
	Girls	Boys		
<b>Overall (girls and boys)</b>				
<b>Economic backwardness (low income or poverty)</b>	3	2	4	4
<b>Migration of family in search of employment</b>			1	3
<b>Inadequate school scholarships</b>			1	
<b>Shortage of teaching staff for higher grades<sup>7</sup></b>	1		2	1
<b>Failure in examination</b>			3	1
<b>Large family size (4–6 children)<sup>8</sup></b>			2	
<b>Purchase of books, uniforms</b>	1		1	
<b>Not affordable to pay board fees twice a year</b>			1	1

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<sup>7</sup> No science teacher for higher grades in V1S2. No teachers for science and English in V2S1. There are excess teachers in some schools.

<sup>8</sup> Can afford to send only one child to school.

<b>Girls' dropouts</b>				
<b>Accessibility to secondary schools<sup>9</sup></b>	1		4	2
<b>Transportation cost</b>	3		4	2
<b>Early marriage</b>	3		2	1
<b>Preference for boys to higher education</b>			1	1
<b>Safety while travelling to school and back</b>			1	
<b>Help in domestic chores</b>	2		1	1
<b>Sickness</b>	1			1
<b>Care of sick in family</b>	1			1
<b>Parents' separation</b>				1
<b>Boys' dropouts</b>				
<b>Anxious to take up job rather than studies</b>			1	
<b>Took up employment due to family pressures<sup>10</sup></b>		3	1	1

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<sup>9</sup> Range of distance of secondary schools from students' homes is between 2.5 and 5.0 km, although some are even further away.

<sup>10</sup> Sickness or death of the family breadwinner.

<b>Slow learners</b>		1		
<b>Join army</b>				1

“Economic backwardness” emerged as a major factor behind high dropouts from school. Many parents are engaged in farming and/or labour work and rear animals for additional income. They need their children to work on the farm during harvest season or to help care for the animals. The relatively attractive daily wages during this season (PKR 1,500–2,000) also encourage parents to have their children work. This situation affects girls, as they are required to do domestic chores when their parents are busy with farm work. A low family income means they cannot afford private transportation to take them to and from school, as the cost of transportation is rising in tandem with the rise in fuel prices. The latter point is also linked to the issue of accessibility of secondary schools. The distance to secondary schools poses a significant barrier to girls, not least because they cannot go to school by bicycle or bus, which are two options open to boys. The situation for girls is further compounded by the cultural practice of early marriage. However, it emerged in the focus group discussions that the prospect of early marriage seems to act as a driving force for girls to perform well in their studies so that their parents do not take them out of school and have them married because they are not doing well in education. While girls are reported to be more interested in education, they are still leaving school prematurely. Only one sampled girls’ school acknowledged that dropouts from school could occur if teachers are not concerned with students’ progress.

In other cases, dropouts are among migrating communities (in the context of this study, Afghans), who often move to other places in search of employment. However, there is no information about whether those children continued their schooling in the new location or dropped out. More boys drop out after matriculation because they join the Military Academy for training before being recruited into the army. Boys have more freedom to choose their life path than girls do, and they often opt to go into the labour force, where

they can learn work skills, instead of staying in school. When boys start earning, parents generally do not force them to go back to their studies, as they are happy with the extra money to help support the family. Children who leave school prematurely usually never go back to school. However, there are exceptions. Some children return to school after two or three years and use technology-enabled learning (TEL) to prepare for exams from home.

These reported causal factors for dropping out of school are consistent with the evidence in the extant literature, which largely identifies poverty as a leading reason for students dropping out from school (Abuya et al., 2013; Al-Hroub, 2014). Grayson and Grayson (2003) noted that students often cite both financial and academic reasons for leaving school prematurely. Long home-to-school distances and poor transportation were listed among the significant causes of dropout. Children, especially girls, from low-income households suffer the most, as commuting costs and time increase. Parents are not comfortable with their daughters walking long distances alone, especially after puberty. Both distance and travel time are major impediments to girls' continued schooling (Lewin & Sabates, 2011; Mughal et al., 2019).

Some researchers argue that children drop out because of the inter-related effects of push and pull factors. While family poverty and low income often lead to children dropping out of school (pull factors), the underlying causes were often found to be structural — for example, underfunded health and social services and lack of employment opportunities (Ananga, 2011). Contrary to the literature that identifies a family's poor education background as a pull factor because of a lack of support at home for a child's learning (Tsolou & Babalis, 2020), our findings point to family support as a push factor that shapes children's ability to continue schooling. Other research has shown that parents' migration, poor preparation for examinations and poor quality of learning in elementary school are all causes of students' dropout at the secondary level (Ullah et al., 2022). Khan et al. (2020) argued that poor academic performance is one of the main causes of dropout. Lack of toilets was listed as a major deterrent to continuing in secondary school as girls reach puberty (Adukia et al., 2017).



Three of the eight sampled schools — V1S2, V2S1 and V2S2 — had no children with disabilities enrolled; three – V1S1, V3S1 and V4S1 – had students with mild disabilities; and two — V3S2 and V4S2 — admitted children with locomotor disabilities. The District Education official also confirmed that there was an established practice of “do not refuse any child with disability if approached.” However, there has been no specific focus on the enrolment and retention of children with disabilities in the overall commitment to improve enrolment and retention. In general, children with severe disabilities seem to stay at home and do not get enrolled in either regular schools or special schools. Community discussions in Dhakku, Maarath and Munday confirmed this. Some children with severe disabilities may attend Madrassas. The prevailing social prejudice against children with disabilities — for example, prejudice about their capacity to learn and function like other children and a perception that they are a burden — seems to influence such practices, depriving them of their right to education.

### **6.3 *Measures by school and community to address school dropout issues***

Article 25A of Pakistan’s Constitution states “free and compulsory education to all children aged 5–16 years and the State is committed to transform its education system in accordance with the sustainable development goal 4.” The government’s commitment to education is reflected in its focused monitoring of enrolment and dropout rates. There are guidelines for the implementation of monitoring of enrolment and dropout and a school reform road map is in operation (School Education Department, 2018). Girls’ enrolment and retention receive specific focus and are treated as indicators for measuring school performance. The government recognises the school with top enrolment and retention of female students with its School of the Year award. In some districts of Punjab, there are scholarships and lunches to promote girls’ education, but Chakwal does not yet have such a programme.

Each school has a school council consisting of 7–11 community members who work to support the welfare of students and attend to the issue of dropouts. For example, they contact the parents of children who drop out of school and encourage them to bring the children back to school. Some community respondents said that such councils in rural areas

are extremely committed to and invested in their role. Schools maintain records of attendance, follow up on absentees and record the reasons for dropout. The teachers contact the parents by phone or through other students or arrange a visit for a face-to-face discussion to find out why the child has dropped out of school and motivate them to have the child continue in school. The focus group discussions with both male and female students confirmed that such measures are in place. Parents inform the school if a child has already started earning or if they have decided to withdraw their child from school, and that information is recorded in the register. The girls' school in Maarath calls a meeting of parents, but not all parents attend.

Some schools provide extra teaching outside school hours for students who have missed school to help them catch up with the missed lessons. Four of the sampled schools (three boys' schools and one girls' school) reported offering catch-up lessons and the boys' focus group discussion confirmed this initiative was on offer. The head teachers from six of the schools (both girls' and boys' schools) reported that they had collectively contributed to the costs of schooling — for example, board examination fees, transportation costs, admission for matriculation, or uniform and books — for certain students in need. Each student in Grades 9–12 must pay Education Board fees twice a year. The government provides one set of books in English for free to all students, but students who prefer books written in Urdu must buy them from the publishers or in the market.

At the community level, there appeared to be no organised measures in place to address the issue of school dropouts. Communities either considered this issue to be parents' responsibility or were not able to intervene because of a lack of resources. One community claimed that taking a group or collective approach to deal with students' retention did not work because of ethnicity and religious issues. As a result, some families still have children who are not enrolled in school. Furthermore, the sampled communities, students and head teachers expressed a need to highlight awareness of the prevalence of dropout and the importance of girls' education for the family and community. Nonetheless, the discussions revealed that some individuals have taken the initiative to promote education. Their actions include need-based community consultations on the importance of education and

afternoon school in Chawli for people who left school prematurely. In Maarath, one parent provides transport to five girls from the village so they can get to school, and if a girl has no father or parents, a private service provider either does not charge her or offers transportation at half price.

Female students in Grades 9/10 in the sampled schools confirmed that community does not play a role in encouraging children to stay in school and said that it must actively address the issue of school dropouts. They envisage that opinion leaders (Maarath) and the community head or village chief (Saigolabad) could promote the importance of girls' education — including staying in education — by encouraging parents to send their daughters to school and keep them in school. Female students from V1S1 acknowledged that there were instances of the community encouraging parents to put or keep their child in education — although not all parents agree — and in rare cases extending financial support to needy students. Male students in Grades 9/10 in the sampled schools also believe that leaders could motivate parents to keep their children in school. They reported that poverty is an all-consuming challenge and so parents pay less attention to advice on education. The boys from the Gah school acknowledged that some parents talk to each other about school dropouts and some boys discuss the topic among themselves, and their conversations are then conveyed to parents.

Bedari, which advocates for women's and girls' rights in Pakistan, has been instrumental in supporting the education of girls in 20 villages of Chakwal district. It has implemented a comprehensive programme consisting of financial incentives, life skills and human rights training, and community mobilisation with a focus on girls' secondary education. The financial help for girls to cover a portion of their schooling expenses aims to alleviate the financial burden of education and serve as a motivating factor for girls to continue their education. Bedari has conducted specialised training for girls to equip them with essential life skills and a solid understanding of basic human rights. Community mobilisation to engage parents and community leaders — for example, direct action to get girls back in school, discussions with school committees about school-based violence against girls and

solutions to address transportation issues — has fostered a collective commitment to girls' secondary education.

*Enablers for students to remain in school and continuing education*

The factors that influence students to either remain in school or leave are rarely mutually exclusive. Instead, they are inter-related and interactional. It is essential to recognise the influence of these dynamics in both enabling and restricting the right to education. A common perception across communities, students and teachers was that there has been a change in the attitude of parents towards their children's education, inspired by progressive trends in society. Most parents reported being keen to send their children to school and treat their daughters and sons equally with no discrimination. Their preference is that the children learn science subjects. The support of fathers is the key enabling factor within the context of family support in general for girls to study and afford to meet their school expenses. The level of family support also determined the level of education that girls could access and complete. The female students from Dhakku and Maarath acknowledged that their parents are their motivating agents.

*My mother wants me to become a teacher or join the army — Female respondent, girls' school, Gah.*

The focused discussions revealed certain enablers identified by students. Students' progress in education seems to motivate parents to keep them in education (Dhakku). However, this progress depends on an individual's approach and efforts (as noted by a head teacher from Gah) and has a strong association with the quality of learning that schools provide. Students in certain cases help each other to catch up with missed lessons (Saigolabad). Some children have accessed mobile TEL for continuing education (Maarath). The focus group discussions also suggested that it would be helpful if transport were provided (the higher secondary school in Latifal has transport for students); if there were medical camps either in the village or at school, and schools had science labs, a library, games or a hostel to house students who live too far away to commute every day; and if

communities did fundraising to help students to remain in school and continue their education.

Initiatives by individuals in the community to address the issue of school dropouts also served as enablers for students to remain in school and continue their education. Two such initiatives were an evening school in Chawli that focused on girls' education and ran for a few years, and support with transportation costs for girls in Dhakku and Maarath. However, the sustainability of such choices is dependent on external forces. Some educated married girls in the community took the initiative to create awareness in their families about the importance of girls' education and promote their schooling (Chawli). Social media campaigns and targeted interventions by Bedari played a useful role in promoting education and motivating parents to enrol or keep their children in school. Furthermore, communities consider that increased mobility resulting from improved infrastructure and transportation acts as an enabler in most cases for encouraging and supporting education (Chawli).

All three stakeholder groups acknowledge that government and schools have played their part in enabling more children to enrol and remain in education by, for example, upgrading primary schools into elementary schools and elementary schools into secondary schools, establishing new schools in unserved areas, and providing books free to all students. However, some teachers said that upgrading has caused a proliferation of schools and affected their viability. Nonetheless, the students reported that having a secondary school close to their district helps them to continue their education beyond the secondary level and increases their access to higher education. Moreover, public private partnerships (PPP) in education with Punjab Education Foundation secondary schools, run by the private sector and funded by government, have been promoted. However, more productive PPP modalities to enhance the reach and quality of secondary education require a committed plan of action. A government initiative to provide pickup and drop-off services for children with disabilities enrolled in special schools acts as a huge enabler of education for children with disabilities.

The schools reported various interventions to encourage students to remain in and continue their education. They included offering STEM subjects, which parents perceive as offering opportunities, and creating positive learning environments in schools, with a quality teaching approach guided by self-accountability and fear of Allah. There is a reported focus on personality development, extracurricular activities and preparing students for life after education (V4S2). One girls' and three boys' schools — V1S2, V2S1, V2S2 and V3S2 — offer coaching sessions outside of school hours to students who have returned to school to help them catch up on missed lessons and to students who have failed examinations. The female students from Dhakku acknowledged that such additional teaching help was available to them. The Farogh-e-Taaleem Fund (FTF), which is maintained by collecting PKR 20 per month from each student, is used to pay the salary of a private teacher recruited locally due to a shortage of teachers, for uniforms for needy students and for other expenses.

#### **6.4        *Challenges to Students Remaining in School and Continuing Their Education*** ***Social attitudes towards girls' education***

Two contrasting trends in the context of girls' education co-exist.

On the one hand, a progressive attitude towards girls' education is reflected in the understanding that if girls become aware of their rights and act against rights violations, they can handle difficult situations, earn money and improve their lives, and be teachers and educate their children. Communities recognise that girls in general are intelligent, hard-working and competitive and perform better than boys in their studies. The community in Chawli acknowledged that the current generation of girls can be role models and help to change prevailing mindsets. They could do so by both earning through part-time jobs and studying. This positive community attitude seems to drive some girls to continue and complete their secondary education.

On the other hand, community perceptions about the value of girls' education are conditioned by gender stereotypes. Communities view the usefulness of girls' knowledge in terms of becoming a good mother, running a household and family efficiently, taking care of

elders and keeping their house clean and healthy. So, girls studying beyond secondary education is considered “not good” and girls are not allowed to have a job after they are married. The community opinion is that boys will use their knowledge to find work to support their parents in the future, and that girls’ knowledge will bring them a good match in marriage and help them support their in-laws. This biased perception of the value of education overrides parents’ positive attitudes towards education for both girls and boys, and the girls often seem to face barriers to continuing in school and are removed from education at either the elementary or matriculation stage.

*Girls get knowledge but at the end, they are at home. There is no need of jobs for females, and they just need to do household chores. — Focused discussion with community in Chawli village.*

The girls, however, said that they want to do something for their family and support their parents with their education, make their parents proud, be independent and build their own careers. They value education as necessary for shaping their character. Some wish to gain eligibility to join the army, breaking gender stereotypes. There is a strong sense of desire not to be left behind and to engage in productive actions in the community and society at large. The girls who participated in the study want parents to trust their daughters as much as they trust their sons. They propose counselling to bring such a change in mindset.

### ***Inclusive education***

The general attitude among communities and educational institutions seems to be that children with non-physical disabilities should be educated in “special schools” rather than local schools. This reveals an intrinsic discrimination and prejudice against the capabilities of these children. Consequently, neither equipping teachers in the local schools with the skills required for teaching children with disabilities nor providing learning resources that could facilitate inclusion seem to have received any focus. Also, many teachers seem to be afraid that other students will create a hostile environment for students with non-physical disabilities. Furthermore, there are only 11 “special schools” in the district and four of them are in Chakwal city, posing a serious challenge of accessibility to children with disabilities

from rural areas. The respondents reflected on this issue, noting the situation of a child with a physical disability not going to “special school” because her parents cannot afford a special rickshaw for her transportation (Dhakku), and children with hearing impairments and mental disabilities staying at home because they cannot go too far from home (Chakwal, Maarath). This lack of accessibility to “special schools” reflects that awareness and practice of “pickup and drop-off” provision in “special schools” has not yet reached most communities. All this discourages enrolment and retention of children with disabilities.

### ***Poverty and “economic backwardness”***

The interplay between poverty and cultural practices poses a major challenge for the education of children in general and girls in particular. Farming and/or manual labour are the main sources of income for most families in rural areas. The families’ priority is accessing and gathering food, and they need additional support during the harvest season. They therefore force their children either to work on the farm or to help with domestic chores and refuse to listen to any advice about the children’s education. The students therefore have less, or even no, time for studying at home, but additionally, their parents cannot afford transportation costs to school because of their fluctuating income. Regular flooding (notably the floods in 2022) aggravates their economic situation further.

Prevailing social attitudes and cultural practices mean that boys are given preference when it comes to enrolling and staying in higher education, as parents look to them for future support, and girls are prevented from remaining in school and continuing their education because of early marriage. Furthermore, anxiety over safety in school or commuting drives many parents to have their daughters married at an early age.

### ***Infrastructure***

The focus group discussions and key informant interviews revealed two challenges related to commuting to school: most children have to walk for 20–30 minutes to get to school, and students from hilly areas find it hard to walk during summer, when the roads are difficult to walk on because they are so dry, and roads and pathways get damaged and become muddy during rainy season. Another infrastructure-related challenge is that classrooms are not



large enough to accommodate the increasing number of students (V1S2) and so tend to be overcrowded (UNDP, 2020).

### ***Services***

Adequacy and accessibility were reported as challenges in terms of the quality of services. A shortage of teachers was identified as a challenge by four of the sampled schools (two girls' and two boys' schools) with specialist subject teachers not available in girls' schools for mathematics or computer studies (V2S1), or for biology or chemistry (V4S1), and in boys' schools for English, biology or chemistry (V1S2, V4S2). One school (V4S2) reported that many positions remaining vacant was another challenge. Some teachers therefore teach more than one subject, and consequently, some have to teach subjects other than their specialisation. This situation may have implications for the quality of students' learning. Female students identified the shortage of teachers as a cause for school dropout (V2S1). The District Education administration acknowledged that there is a time lag in recruitment and that parents prefer to send their children to schools where there are adequate number of teachers.

The government provides one set of books in English for each student. Students who prefer to use books written in Urdu have to purchase their own books, and often they cannot afford to buy them from the market. One girls' school (V4S1) and two boys' schools (V2S2, V3S2) reported this situation as presenting a challenge for students to continue their schooling. The non-salary budget and Farogh-e-Taaleem fund (FTF) is perceived to be insufficient given the deplorable state of the infrastructure, since the costs of the operating expenses, development expenditure and supplies that such budgets are expected to meet are high (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2022). So, these funds find it difficult to meet the challenges of needy students in attending school (three schools reported this factor: V2S1, V2S2, and V3S1). Some communities make donations from fundraising, but this is not a regular source of income.

Sickness was identified as an influencing factor for dropout by girls (V2S1) and the head teacher of a girls' school (V3S1) because of poor access to healthcare and limited

availability of quality services. The public hospital in Chakwal is about 10 kilometres away and has no proper equipment or medicines. Communities therefore depend on local practitioners to attend to all minor ailments (Dhakku, Maarath).

### **6.5        *Student Retention and Quality of Learning Outcomes***

This study looked at the relationship between students' retention and academic performance at two stages of secondary education: matriculation or Grade 10 and higher secondary or Grade 11. It attempted to measure academic performance by the percentage of students who obtained matriculation or higher secondary school certification organised by the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education. The secondary level of education provides the foundation for higher education, and the State promises "fair and equal opportunities to receive quality secondary education in Pakistan" (Noon Social Learning Platform, 2023).

Table 5. Students' retention and academic performance of two cohorts

School	Sex	Enrolled students (2016-17)				Enrolled students (2017-18)	
		Grade 10 Matric		Grade 11		Grade 10 Matric	
		Retained/ appeared	Per cent passed	Retained/ appeared	Per cent passed	Retained/ appeared	Per cent passed
V1S1S2	Girls	32e (84%)	100	N/A	92	32e (84%)	100
	Boys	85 (94%)	100	N/A	95	83 (95%)	100
V2S1S2	Girls	18 (86%)	100	N/A	92	19 (95%)	100
	Boys	8 (61%)	100	N/A	92	19 (79%)	100
V3S1S2	Girls	26 (79%)	100	N/A	95	24 (77%)	100
	Boys	37 (88%)	100	N/A	91	36 (84%)	100
V4S1S2	Girls	48 (86%)	100	N/A	95	52 (91%)	100
	Boys	75 (69%)	100	N/A	97	94 (91%)	100
All eight schools	Girls	124 (83%)	100	N/A	94	127 (87)	100
	Boys	205 (81%)	100	N/A	89	232 (90)	100

e= estimated, using the trend since retention data could not be collected.

All students who turned up to sit the Grade 10 examinations in 2020–21 and 2021–22 received a passing grade. In the case of higher secondary exams, the results for 2021–22 are available but for 2020–21, it was reported that all students who turned up to sit the exams received a passing grade. This was a response to the disruption to education caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the absence of any dependable quantitative assessment, the study relied on qualitative information from the key informant interviews to interpret the relationship between student retention and academic performance. The extra coaching offered outside of school hours to help students catch up with missed lessons and the creation of positive learning environments in schools through quality teaching guided by self-accountability and fear of Allah could perhaps have contributed to the levels of academic performance seen in these years. And certainly, findings from three existing research studies that examined determinants of academic performance would support this assumption. One study found that the school climate followed by teacher effectiveness were the strongest determinants of students' academic performance and that other socio-economic factors have less influence (Malik et al., 2015). A second found that most students claim that societal and parental factors do not contribute to their academic failure (Abdullah & Bhatti, 2018). And a third showed that Chakwal was one of the six top districts in South Punjab in terms of learning achievement for three consecutive years (Sheik, 2016). This high level of students' performance ideally — that is, if the reported quality teaching was actually the practice — reflects the moving picture of education system and social values. It refers to students' fulfilment of their long-term goals and plays a vital role in developing high-quality citizens and workforces for the nation (Ali et al., 2009).

The reported academic performance is further supported by other information from KIIs. A common response across all the sampled schools was that students who attend school regularly do better and achieve good scores. The students who participated in the study argued that retention enables learning and helps in the quality of academic performance. Students who attend school regularly have an estimated pass rate in board examinations of 80–90 per cent (V3S2, V4S1). One teacher who participated in the survey (from V1S2)

claimed that school toppers (i.e., highest-ranked students) in second year from their school had grades similar to those of their peers in private schools. Most of the head teachers and communities that participated in the study acknowledged that girls perform better in school than boys. Failure in examinations is considered by both communities and head teachers to be due to students' poor quality of learning and prompts parents to withdraw boys to enter the workforce and girls to be married.

These findings corroborated the existing literature which claims that retention in school and its impact on children's performance is empirically diverse. The performance of students is found to be affected by several factors that various empirical studies have reported as being both intrinsic and extrinsic (Mushtaq & Khan, 2012). Raychaudhuri et al. (2010) showed that attendance, financial stability, teacher-student ratios, gender and distance to schools significantly affect students' performance. Goga et al. (2015) quantitatively found that previous academic performance was significant and positively related to students' current performance. Their findings are supported by another study that showed that if a student has a weak educational base at the primary and elementary level, their academic performance at secondary level will be adversely affected (Suleman & Gul, 2015). Furthermore, the *t*-test results showed strong evidence that female students perform significantly better than male students. The availability of learning facilities has been found to play a vital role in students' performance, with overcrowded classrooms having a very negative effect (Kapur, 2018). Moreover, a better overall school environment supports students in their learning process and therefore plays a positive role in terms of academic achievement — for example, students are encouraged to attain the level of existing school standards (Dahar et al., 2009). Further, the findings in another study on academic skills consultations indicate that students who attended consultations performed better than those who did not attend, and the difference is greater for those who attended more consultations (Ashton-Hay & Doncaster, 2021).

A further analysis of the literature reconfirms the interrelatedness and intersectionality of retention and academic performance. It reveals that both retention and several other factors contribute to students' academic performance. However, it also shows that these

factors are not mutually exclusive and that several other factors contribute in turn to students' retention. For example, better teacher-student ratios, school environments and accessibility of schools all encourage more students to continue in education. Such factors seem to play a dual role: enhancing students' retention and improving their academic performance.

## **6.6 Policy Responses to Promote Students' Retention and Inclusion**

The following key policy asks emerged from the qualitative data.

### ***Accessibility of secondary education***

All four communities that participated in the study claim that if schools were available within an accessible distance, parents would send their daughters to them. It is essential to increase the number of secondary schools and to encourage greater participation in and completion of schooling among students. This twofold aim requires an increase in the budget for secondary education to increase access to school and ensure the availability and provision of quality services. The government has already demonstrated its commitment to upgrade schools to make secondary education more accessible. However, some teachers questioned the practicality of having too many high schools within a small radius. Perhaps a balanced approach may be required in the application of upgrading to maintain its effectiveness.

### ***Transportation***

All the communities, schools and girls that participated in the study advocate for government intervention to address transportation to and from school. This issue is closely bound to the issue of accessibility and is likely to grow more pressing with time because of inflation and price rises. It is imperative to address the issue of transportation given its disproportionate impact on the schooling of girls. One option is to give schools responsibility for managing students' transportation.

### ***Inclusive education***

The policy and practice of “do not refuse any child with disability if approached” must go beyond symbolic enrolment and embrace active inclusion. Schools must actively adopt an inclusive approach to education and could draw on lessons learned from around the world to guide the integration of children with disabilities into regular schools. To help create an inclusive environment in schools, teachers should be equipped with relevant skills and provided with resource material. This would also go some way towards challenging social attitudes at all levels, including communities. A clearly focused inclusive policy and strategy should be guided by Article 7<sup>11</sup> and the principles<sup>12</sup> of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNOHCHR, 2008).

### ***Placement of adequate number of teachers***

This is a common issue across all the schools that participated in the survey. There seems to be an obstacle in the form of long-pending recruitment and delays in engaging private teachers locally to address at least part of the shortage. The underlying cause of the teacher shortage could be insufficient financing in education: public spending on education in 2018 was only 2.9 per cent, which is much lower than in comparable countries (ADB, 2022). There must be a commitment in education to quality learning and there must be an adequate number of qualified teachers to safeguard that quality. These two factors require an increased public budget for secondary education. Further, enhancing non-salary budgets or promoting public private partnerships could be explored as complementary options.

### ***Legislation to make it compulsory for parents to send their children to school***

Parents are currently obligated to send their children to a certain school between five and 16 years of age, but there is a need for a more rigorous policy that stipulates parents’ responsibility to ensure at least a secondary level of education for their children. Many

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<sup>11</sup> “States Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.”

<sup>12</sup> Respect for dignity; non-discrimination; full and effective participation and inclusion; respect for differences; equality of opportunity; accessibility; equality between women and men; and respect for children.

argue that such a measure would be counterproductive, and some are apprehensive about its enforceability. Nonetheless, the idea, and potential methods of implementing it, deserves further exploration. However, such efforts must guard against being adversarial.

### ***Economic improvement of families***

Poverty and “economic backwardness” are intersectional. There are no easy ways to address them, and the government already has some programmes in place. Nonetheless, this twofold issue merits further critical inquiry as any updated response could potentially address both push and pull factors behind students dropping out of school.



## **7.0 Lessons Learned and Pointers for Future Action**

The outcomes of this study provide valuable information to help stakeholders recognise the issues behind school dropout, identify factors that would enhance students' retention rates and academic performance, and develop new strategies to address the issues.

Government, policymakers, educational institutions and parents could all benefit from this information.

### **7.1 *Value of Students' Retention Research***

Examining the trends in student retention in education in previous years and analysing both the causal factors for dropouts and the efficacy of existing strategies to address them are useful exercises to help stakeholders identify and respond to current and future potential barriers to staying in education. The information could facilitate improvement in students' retention and enable children to stay in the school system and gain access to quality education. It could also contribute not only to successful secondary education completion but also to addressing the disparities in education and ensuring that no child is left behind, especially girls, children with disabilities and children from disadvantaged communities.

### **7.2 *Collaborative Approach to Student Retention***

While dropping out from school has personal (individual) and social consequences (Rumberger, 2011), the circumstances causing children dropping out need more attention from the academic world. Considerable research evidence shows that educational institutions can significantly mitigate some of the causes of student dropout and that schools are the strongest determinant of students' academic performance. This research identified medium of instruction, e-learning activity, inadequate and poorly maintained physical and material resources, inadequacies in assessment of individual learners' progress, and school climate as influencing the academic performance of students (Nisar et al., 2017; Njuguna, 2021). There is therefore a need for a coordinated collaborative, systematic approach to students' retention that involves students, schools and communities. Three key concepts of Vincent Tinto's (2015) student integration model

would be useful in guiding such an approach. First, persistence is a function of interactions between an individual student and the educational environment. Second, the degree of “fit” between a student’s motivation to learn and academic ability and the educational institution’s characteristics is a significant factor in determining the likelihood of a student’s decision to remain in education. Third, students enter secondary schooling with a variety of characteristics that are associated with their family background (e.g., socio-economic status) and varying degrees of skills, abilities and preparation in their primary and elementary schooling. It is imperative to contextualise these concepts in a collaborative approach to students’ retention, using Tinto’s model of academic integration and social integration to inform its implementation to enhance students’ retention. Academic integration would include stimulating learning processes and classroom practice combined with meaningful student-teacher interactions with a focus on enablers and challenges that emerged from this research. Social integration would foster extra-curricular opportunities and informal peer groups that encourage cooperation and support through engagement with the community. Both aspects of integration would aim to instil among students a sense that their involvement in education matters and to help them feel rewarded and experience a sense of affirmation (French, 2017; Tinto, 2015).

Within the above perspective of academic and social integration, the proposed collaborative approach to student retention could draw on some common retention strategies:

- a. Student-centred approaches to learning (active and deep learning strategies).
- b. Authentic and relevant curricula. Student-responsive curriculum development.
- c. Collaborative learning situations, where learning is active and interactive.
- d. Assessment *for* learning instead of assessment *of* learning.
- e. Social and academic integration into higher education institutions that has a positive impact on students’ sense of belonging. Encourage improved communication among students from culturally diverse groups.

The communities of practices required for these strategies must be created by the education department. The gaps in and potential of practices will form the agenda for a

collective reflection among schools, students and communities, the outcome of which will lead to defining the processes and interventions of the proposed collective approach to students' retention.

### **7.3 *Managing Research Ex Situ***

The process of managing research ex situ poses key challenges in aligning perspectives to the purpose of research and in establishing a common understanding about the design and concepts of a study. Moreover, the designed data instruments may not be completely comprehensive, and there is often a need to expand an inquiry based on field-level responses in order to avoid data gaps and research fatigue. The design of future research must consider lessons from previous research in three aspects. First, the person who designed the research must be involved in the initiation of the related field work and researcher orientation must be handled by the same person, since a change of personnel may cause differences in how the design concepts are translated into field processes. Second, the person who designed the research must hold regular consultations with field researchers to resolve any differences that arise and reinforce the core focus of the study. Third, the contract terms must allow for two stages: pilot testing and the main study. The main study must include terms for full completion of processes informed by the pilot testing.

### **7.4 *Reliability, Accessibility and Public Accountability***

Student retention reflects educational institutions' commitment to student achievement. Changes in retention rates can be monitored by maintaining records of student enrolment and dropout rates. However, these records are only useful if they are reliable and if the public has access to the information they contain. Unfortunately, there is often a gap in understanding this perspective across the system and no reliable system seems to have been established yet (Abdullah & Bhatti, 2018). As a result, some schools might deliberately manipulate their numbers to remain within the acceptable targets and so are reluctant to share that information with external researchers for fear of consequences. This makes the data less reflective of true student outcomes, which can have negative effects on both students and institutions. It is therefore crucial to put in place strategies that position

schools as partners in ongoing research and make student retention part of the mission to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4.

### **7.5        *Unique Prompts to Encourage Student Retention***

The schools that participated in the study report 20 per cent higher completion rates compared to the previous year. The enablers and challenges experienced by different respondents for students to remain in and continue schooling are of a common nature. But the actions taken by sampled communities and schools in response to those challenges must have been different and more powerful to create such an encouraging trend and contain the challenges encountered. Such prompts to encourage retention could be specific and contextual, could be harnessed for future work and merit future investigation.

## Annexure 1: Data

### 1. Summary of Qualitative Data from Focus Group Discussions with Communities

Village and participants	Reasons for dropout	Girls' education	Education of children with disabilities	Role of community in addressing dropout	Enablers	Policy asks
Chawli Girls continue until matriculation and boys until secondary. Women = 6 Men = 4	Affordability. Boys think they are mature enough to start earning. Girls are from backward areas. Family size 4-5. Accessibility to high school. Transportation. Early marriage – as soon as get good proposal. Shortage of teachers – no teacher for science. Migration for employment. Exam fee. Scholarship and schemes reach urban and not rural areas. Less focus by government on rural areas.	Bringing up a family, care of elders, run household efficiently, keeps house clean and healthy. Girls are intelligent and want to study. They are hardworking and perform better in studies. But girls are not allowed to do job after marriage. Boys need to work outside, and girls only remain at home. For girls, their families decide.	Many children live in villages, but special schools are far away in cities, Jhelum, Chakwal. If sent to regular school, get ignored. Lack of required equipment in schools, lag them behind. Attitude that they cannot do anything, are burden, and so stay at home.	Need-based community consultations. School councils are more functional in rural areas. Groups failed due to ethnicity. Insaaf – Afternoon school project – those who left school return.	Media motivation Increased mobility. Present generation can be role models. Educated married girls creating awareness in the family. Individual initiative of evening school that ran for a few years focusing on girls' education.	Accessible secondary. Adequate number of teachers. Transportation. More scholarships. Inclusive education for teachers in local schools. .

Dhakku Women = 12 Men = 7 Girls = 9	Economic backwardness /// Sick of an earning member. Transportation. /// Accessibility: 2.5 – 5.0 kms. Purchase of books, uniform.	Skills education to earn from home. Learn manners. Getting jobs. Good match in marriage. Can teach and earn.	Hearing impaired, physically challenged – special school. Child with mental retardation not going to school.	Not available. Naroval – a person arranges two vans for transportation of girls to schools.	Parents want to educate both daughters and sons.	Upgrade – if school available locally, parents send children. Transportation. Economic improvement.
Maarath Women = 10 Men = 5	Economic backwardness. Accessibility to secondary. Transportation. Safety of girls. Help in domestic chores. Cannot afford to send more than one child to school. Boys in grade 9/10 indulge in other activities. Children left school, do not go back to school.	Would be good mother. Aware of rights and act against violations. Can handle difficult situations. Girls are more regular with a fear their parents take them off from school and get them married.	Hearing, physical and mental reported but the children stay at home. Special school far away in Chakwal.	No help since no resources. Need awareness. One parent provides transport to five more girls. Some families have children not enrolled in school.	Family support for girls to study and to meet their expenses.	
Munday Women = 5 Men = 3	Economic backwardness. Accessibility to secondary. Transportation. Failure in examinations. Preference to boys for higher education.	Improve their lives, can be teachers, handle situations, can earn and educate children. Girls are more interested in education but are stopped.	There are children with disabilities in the village, but do not go to school.	No community involvement. It is parents' responsibility.	Most parents are willing to send children to school. Husband support decides level of education for girls.	Upgrade till matriculation. Provision of transport. Adequate number of teachers. Change of shift.

	Priority for food, education comes next. Shortage of teachers in some and excess teachers in some other schools. Family size 5-6					Transfer of excess teachers.
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**2. Summary of Qualitative Data from Focus Group Discussions with Girl Students of Grades 9/10**

School and Participants	Fellow students dropped out		Remain in school and Continue Education		Value of education	Role in addressing dropouts	
	Number	Reasons	Enablers	Challenges		School	Community
Dhakku Grade 10 – 4 Public schools Grade 9 – 1 Private school	2 Left after Grade 6, 8	Economic backwardness Can not afford to buy books.	Parents are the motivating agents.	Desire to study at least grade 12. But difficult to continue after Matriculation.	Want to do something for parents. Support parents. Be independent. Join Army.	Provides books, uniforms. Contact parents face to face or phone.	
GAH 10 (grade 9 and 10)	3	Transportation Sickness Moved to another place. Teachers' shortage – English, Science	Mother wants daughter to become a teacher or join the army. // Equipping school with science lab,	15-20 minutes' walk to school. Road gets damaged due to rain. Work in farm or at home during harvest. Domestic chores.	Character building Make parents proud. Serve village and country.	Motivate parents. Teacher bore expenses of 7 <sup>th</sup> class student.	Encourage parents but some agree, others refuse. Some members extend

			library, and games.	Sickness.			financial support.
Maarath 12 (grade 9 and 10)	8 Left after [grade] 8	Accessibility Transportation Early marriage Domestic chores Teasing short height. Care of sick in the family.	Parents motivation towards girls' education.	More restrictions. Apprehension that girls become bold and independent that harms the house and community. Instilling right perspective required.	Vey necessary. Not left behind. Support parents // Be independent. Learn manners. Handle problems.	Teacher contacts children and parents. Provide uniform. Meet part of transportation cost.	No role yet. Opinion leaders can influence girls' education. Rich people can support.
Munday 10 (grade 9 and 10)	4 left in grade 8, 10	Economic backwardness // Early marriage Domestic chores		Transportation Parents force girls to drop out after matric with fear of harassment from boys in the city.	Independent Handle problems. Improve behaviours.	Talked to family and convinced (one of the respondents)	No role yet. Must help.
Saigolabad 11 (grade 9 and 10)	2 left after grade 8.	Economic backwardness // Early marriage	Parents' counselling to trust daughters. Career counselling. Some children return to school after 2-3 years, prepare for exams from home	Transportation cost. Co-education. Domestic chores leave less time for study at home. Mindset sons are everything and look to their support.	Bring up right way. Become broad-minded. Serve parents and village on clean environment. Independent and build own career /// Do good job, earn. Contribute to country.	Convey to parents through other students. Talk to them and persuade sending child to school.	No role yet. Community (Chaudhary) head and Chief of village (Numbedar) could influence



**3. Summary of qualitative data from focus group discussions with boy students of Grades 9/10**

School and Participants	Fellow students dropped out		Remain in school and Continue Education		Value of education	Role in addressing dropouts	
	Number	Reasons	Enablers	Challenges		School	Community
Bhagwal	Not relevant – only from grade 9						
Gah 10 (grade 9 and 10)	4 left in grades 7, 8, 10.	Economic backwardness – took up work in Karachi. Moved to another place. Slow learners.		Force to work in farm during wheat harvest. Roads become muddy during rains. Need to walk 4-5 km	Get job and earn. Support parents. Learn manners. Join Army. Start own work. Learn skills useful at home and work.	Teacher visits parents, understand the problem and encourage to return to school.	Individuals talk to each other. Peer dialogue among boys and convey to parents.
Munday 10 (grade 9 and 10)	2 left in grade 9. + some	Took up employment. Moved to private school. Slow learners.	Desire to continue in higher education.	Parents’ not willing. Hilly area and hard to walk 30 minutes during summer.	Earning opportunities. Own work.	Contact parents through mobile, visit home. (contacted three parents today)	No role yet. Poverty overrides.
Saigolabad 12 (grade 9 and 10)	2 left in grade 6	Took up employment. Moved to private school.	Students help each other to cover up the missed lessons.	Families force children to work in farm during wheat harvest season.	Get job and better the future. Join Army. Civilised.	Maintain contact numbers. Teachers contact	Leaders could motivate parents to continue

			Government must consider school vans for transportation. Desire to continue in higher education	Road becomes muddy during rains.	Handle problems.	parents through mobile or fellow students, encourage to return to school. Teachers teach after school hours to cover up the missed lessons.	their children in school.
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**4. Summary of qualitative data from key informant interviews with school staff**

School	Students dropped out		Role in addressing dropouts		Remain in school and continue education		Inclusion of CWD	Role of retention in learning
	Number	Reasons	Interventions	Challenges	Enablers	Challenges		
V1S2	0	Many complete matriculations. Closer to district Manage transport cost. Fee of 4100 per annum for	Maintain attendance, contact parents by phone or visit. Provide uniform, shoes, sweaters to the needy.	Parents force children to work in farm during crop season.	More schools upgraded to secondary or higher secondary. Establishment of new schools. Social media campaign.	Acute shortage of teachers – one teacher for more than one subject, some teach other than their subject, subject teachers not	No student enrolled in this school. Special school for them in Chakwal.	Enables learning. School topper in second year was on par with private school.

		grades 11, 12 not an issue.	Extra coaching to students back to school after a gap or failed in examinations.		Parents motivated to educate their children in science subjects.	available for English, Biology and Chemistry. Classrooms cannot accommodate increasing student strength.		
V2S2	0 Even in COVID	Children unable to study drop out.	Contact parents, find out reasons, encourage to send to school. Collectively contribute if any case arises and pay board fee or buy books. Extra-coaching to cover up the missed lessons.	Parents' poverty and illiteracy. They Work in fields, animal care and labour work. Parents want their boys to help in farming and in animal care. Concerned in earning money instead of education.	English medium books are given to every student. Uniform for the needy student. Positive school environment with teachers performing duties with fear of Allah and self-accountability . Progress determined by individual approach and efforts.	Student has to buy Urdu medium books from private publishers. Feedback given but no response. Teaching other than specialization is challenging on quality. 3 high schools within 1-5 km radius. Insufficient Non-Salary Budget. No approach road and pathway become muddy during rains.	No student enrolled. Special school in Chakwal for special children.	Good results.

V3S2	Number not specified	Failure in exam at grade 9. Exam fee.	Contact via phone or meet in person. Parents inform if child started earning. Extra-coaching outside school hours to such students.	Parents force children to work in farm during GN harvest. Daily wage PKR 1500-2000/-	Adequate number of teachers available. Teachers highly qualified. Offer science subjects that parents perceive have growth opportunities. Provision of transportation helps. (H S school in Latifal has it)	Prefer boys over girls for higher education. Government provides English books. But students prefer Urdu books. They have to buy Urdu medium books from private publishers.	Children with physical and hearing disabilities attend this school.	80% pass in Board exam.
V4S2	0 until Matric. 1-2% at 1-2 year of Higher secondary	Employment Join Army. Town centre.	Maintain complete data. Class teacher contacts parents on same day and informs child's absenteeism. Ask neighbour students to visit. Teacher also visits, inquires the reason, and encourages to	Dropouts in rural areas.	Competitive spirit among teachers. Focus on personality development and STEM projects. Keep the campus clean. Grooming students. Co-curricular activities – first in district tournaments.	Shortage of teachers – ten vacant positions – Chemistry, Biology Transportation cost Rural areas may have preference to boys over girls for higher education.	Speech and hearing go to special school in Chakwal. Accept physical disabilities .	Outcome of regular students better than irregular. They achieve good marks.

			return to school. Board exam fee paid by teachers.		Legislation to make compulsory for parents to send children to school.			
V2S1	1%	Migration Economic backwardness Transportation Distance to high school.	Persuade parents against long-term absenteeism. Pay board exam fee, cost of transportation, admission of matric for a few cases.	Parents refuse to listen as they need them in farm during crop harvest. Road gets muddy during rain and cannot commute.	Extra coaching during out-of-school hours. Some parents support study time at home. One dropout returned to school – brilliant and catching up. Playground.	Teachers shortage- no teacher for mathematics and computer. Not enough funds to meet students' challenges in attending school. Distance 2-5 km from some villages	Children with disabilities do not join school but stay at home.	
V3S1	Grade 8,9 Girls dropout higher than boys	Economic backwardness Transportation cost with hike in petrol price. Early marriage. Migration of families. Board fees – twice a year. Domestic chores and	Call meeting of parents but some attend while others do not attend.	Family needs domestic help. Parents cannot afford cost of transportation.	Parents send daughters regularly to school to secure their future with qualification to get job. Children access mobile technology for learning. Community donations but not regular.	FTF school fund inadequate – PKR 20/- per student per month. Poor access to health care.	Mild disabilities enrolled into school. Supportive in their learning.	

		care of sick in family. Sickness.						
V1S1	Earlier elementary now matriculation Continue 50% 9/10 grades. 40% 11/12 grades. 15% beyond	Economic backwardness Parents do not allow girls go outside village.	Government focus on enrolment and dropouts. Contact parents through local teachers. Support with fee concession.		Parents wish education for daughters inspired by trend in society. Parents show no difference between girls and boys. Fund raising from people with sound economic background for uniforms.	Early marriage Economic backwardness of families. Quality of government school should improve.	A few mild disabilities enrolled into school. Severe cases stay at home.	Regular students definitely do better.
V4S1	1%	Transfer Parents separation If teachers are not concerned of students' progress, dropout occurs.	Maintain register and if child absent, teacher speaks to child and her parents. If family decided to drop their daughter out from school, the reason recorded. Supported uniform in a potential case of dropout.		One set of books per student. FTF – collect PKR 20/- per month per student that is spent for salary of private teacher and uniform. Hostel could be helpful.	Teachers shortage – biology, chemistry. Students have to purchase Urdu medium books from market.	Enrolled but a very few.	9-10 grades results in last year were 90%. Retention helps in good results.

### 5. Summary of Qualitative Data from Key Informant Interviews with District Education Staff

**Respondent:** Education official

<b>Policies and practices</b>		<b>Enablers</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
<b>Retention</b>	<b>Education of Children with Disabilities</b>		
Guidelines implemented. CM road map	Not refuse any child if approached.	When school gets upgraded to high school, dropout girls return to school.	Transportation
Female enrolment and retention monitored in each school – PMIU	11 special schools in the district and 4 of them in Chakwal city.		Hilly areas. Parents do not like female students reach home evening
School of the year for top enrolment and retention of girl students.	The children enrolled in special schools have provision of pick and drop.	PPP Punjab Education Foundation schools run by private sector or NGOs funded by government for secondary level.	More posts of science teachers are vacant. Under-staffed.
Scholarships and lunch for girls in some districts of Punjab. Chakwal not included.	In regular schools, only physically challenged children are enrolled.		Non-Salary budget provided on the basis of enrolment is inadequate.
Head teachers in collaboration with school council and local community meet parents of dropout children to address the issues.			Teachers placed in rural areas manage to get transfer to city and there is time lag in new recruitment.
Girls enrolment and retention are good in 70% of the schools.		Focus on female literacy, girls' higher education	Parents prefer to send their children to those schools, where there are adequate number of teachers.

## Annexure 2: Data Collection Tools

**[design: please format to reflect the original questionnaire]**

- 1. Lime Survey Questionnaire:** to collect quantitative data on retention and continuation rates from sampled secondary schools

Name of secondary school:

Habitation:

Name of researcher:

Date:

Cohort	Sex	Number of children continuing in school by grade*						Enrolment	
		2021- 22	2020- 21	2019- 20	2018- 19	2017- 18	2016- 17	2016- 17	2017- 18
Final grade	Girls								NA
	Boys								NA
Pre-final grade	Girls						NA	NA	
	Boys						NA	NA	

\*Against enrolment

Please comment:

1. Is there variance in trends of retention between these two cohorts? Yes/No
2. If yes, please specify the trends.

**Guidance notes:**



1. The study is designed to trace the retention of students in secondary education. It covers two cohorts – one enrolled in 2016-17 and another in 2017-18. In the former, you trace their retention from grade 6 to 11 and in the latter from grade 6 to 10 till the academic year 2021-22.
2. Please collect first the enrolment figures at grade six in 2016-17 and 2017-18 academic years and then trace the continuation of those enrolled in subsequent years at higher grades till the academic year 2021-22.
3. Please do not reflect new admissions in subsequent years on the roll in each year. We are only tracing those children enrolled at grade 6 in this sampled school.
4. Please look for trends in retention from cohort 1 to cohort 2 and specify the nature of the trends.
5. Please collect all this data from school records.
6. Please ensure that no field in the questionnaire is left blank.

## 2. Focus Group Discussion

### **Students**

Name of researcher:

Name of the school:

Habitation:

Number of participants:

Grades:

Discussion:    Date:

Time: Start

End

Key questions

1. Have any of your classmates who were enrolled in the same year as yours at grade 6 left school and education? When and why did they leave school?
2. What are your challenges, if any, to remain in education and continue schooling?
3. What have been the factors that enabled you to remain in education and continue schooling despite those challenges?

4. Are there interventions in your school to address those issues that influence students to leave school?
  - a. If yes, how effective do you think those interventions are?
  - b. If no, what could school do to address the issues that influence the students to leave school?
5. What measures could your community take to ensure that students are able to enrol into secondary school and not leave before completing education?

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### **Community**

Name of researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Name of assistant \_\_\_\_\_

Number of participants: Women = Men =

Habitation:

Discussion: Date:

Time: Start

End

#### *Key questions:*

1. In your community, --- number of children have dropped out from secondary school in the past two years and this included --- girls. Why did this happen?
2. What is your position on the education of girls? How does it benefit or harm them?
3. What is your position on the education of children with disabilities? What is the education status of such children in your community? Problems and progress.
4. What do you see as the role of community in promoting children's education?
  - Please specify:
  - If you envisage a role for community.
  - If no, why? Specify reasons.
5. Did you address those issues that influence students dropping out from school in the last two years?

If yes, how did you address and what were the results?

If no, why? Specify reasons.

6. What challenges did you face in promoting education for all children? How did you overcome them?
7. Did you act on the two common issues reported for dropout – accessible school and transportation?
  - If yes, how did you act and what were the results?
  - If no, why? Specify reasons.

### Guidance Notes

1. Please involve students of grade 10 and 11, who were enrolled at grade 6 in the sampled school to respond to questions on retention and drop out.
2. Our primary focus is to understand the enabling factors and challenges in continuing secondary education as well as the reasons for students to drop out. This information is useful only if it is spelt out in clear terms with specific details. As a rule, all general statements need probing further on their response.
3. **Probing questions** are to ask for more details on a particular response (about what someone thinks or feels) to understand it thoroughly. Probing question encourages the respondent to explore their personal feelings and ideas about a specific topic and supports a deeper comprehension for the person asking. These are not used to clarify information or to check respondent's understanding. We must **avoid projecting any of our biases or assumptions on to the respondents.**
  - The topics that require probing in our FGDs are:
    - a. What have been the factors that enable students to remain in education? How do those factors contribute to continue schooling? Responses such as parents support and teachers being nice to us for continuing education need to be unpacked to understand the nature of support.
    - b. Efficacy of interventions in school or community to address issues that influence students to leave school.

- c. Response to girls' education and education of children with disabilities might usually be politically correct
- d. How were the challenges mitigated? Processes adopted and results achieved.

However, if respondents show **resistance** to answer any of the probing questions, we will **go by their choice and respect their privacy**.

- 4. FGDs must present qualitative and quantitative information. Probing is an effective tool to elicit qualitative information, where relevant.
- 5. All behavioural changes must be illustrated with specific examples.
- 6. Choice of community for FGD must be other than the habitation, where school is located, to avoid skewed response to girls' retention in school.
- 7. FGD with communities require presenting facts on dropouts from their habitation in the past two years to facilitate discussion on reasons for such a situation and their response to address it.
- 8. Students' FGD must precede community FGD. The students' response to role of community in ensuring retention or preventing dropout must integrate into the inquiry at community.

### 3. Key Informant Interviews

#### **School official**

Name of interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Name of official \_\_\_\_\_ Gender designation \_\_\_\_\_

Location of school \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Time started \_\_\_\_\_

Time ended \_\_\_\_\_

1. In the past two years, ---- number of children have dropped out from your school. Why did this happen?
2. Are there any differences in the case of girls and children with disabilities staying or leaving school?
2. Are there interventions in your school to address those issues that influence the students to leave school? (*Ask for examples and tie next question to the examples*).
  - a. If yes, since when are these interventions implemented? How effective are those interventions? (*Be specific to link intervention to effectiveness*)?
  - b. If no, what do you think the school could do to address the issues that influence the students to leave school?
3. What are the challenges the school faces in addressing the issues that influence the students to leave school?
4. Have you noticed any change in the retention in the last three years? Yes/No

If yes, what change did you notice?

What do you think is the cause?

5. What do you consider are the reasons for students to remain in school?
6. Does retention increase the learning outcomes of students?
  - a. If yes, please substantiate with data on the performance of your school final students in the last two to three years?
  - b. If not, please specify why you believe it does not?

### **Key official of Public Education Department (1-2)**

Name of interviewer \_\_\_\_\_

Name of official \_\_\_\_\_ Gender designation \_\_\_\_\_

Location \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Time started \_\_\_\_\_ Time ended \_\_\_\_\_

1. What policies and strategies exist to promote retention of students in secondary education?
2. What specific policies and strategies exist to promote retention of girls and children with disabilities in secondary education?
3. How are these policies and strategies grounded at school level?
4. How effective are those actions in bringing about changes in retention? What gaps exist?
5. How many schools in your administrative area record high level of retention in the last two years - overall as well as specific for girls and children with disabilities?
6. Which factors have contributed to such a high level of retention?
7. How many schools in your administrative area record moderate to low levels of retention in the last two years – overall as well as specific for girls and children with disabilities.
8. What measures were conducted to address the issues of continuing schooling in those schools that record moderate and low retention? What gaps exist?
9. What are your plans to improve retention – overall and girls and children with disabilities.

#### **Guidance Notes**

1. Start discussion with facts on retention and dropout rate specific to that school.
2. Please ask probing questions to elicit qualitative information. The topics that require probing in KII are:
  - a. Student friendly environment – Responses such as teachers being nice to students.
  - b. Support initiatives for children in continuing education - Responses such as involvement of school council, sharing test scores of students with parents,

and acknowledging role of media – needs probing further. What role did the school play, what processes or nature of actions were put in place and what was the outcome? Information for the last two years would be helpful to substantiate their contribution.

3. Performance of students must be supported with data on examination results. The details of performance at the school final public examination for those children enrolled in grade 6 and completed the school must be collected for the last two to three academic years.
4. Students' FGD must precede KII. The students' response to role of school in ensuring retention or preventing dropout must integrate into the inquiry at school.
5. Any movement of children from private to public school must go beyond statement of fact. This can be discussed in students' and community groups too to understand their experience in both schools.
6. We can always refer to records to triangulate the information shared in KII.
7. Please get brief excerpts of the policies and strategies for retention.
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